

TELEGRAM

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FROM
AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES

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Argentine Reaction to Todman Human Rights Speech

ACTION: SECSTATE WASHDC **PRIORITY**

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SUMMARY: Assistant Secretary Todman's Latin America policy speech received wide coverage and editorial comment in the local press, with initial emphasis placed on ten points cautioning US response on human rights. Subsequent distribution and publication of full text largely cleared up misconceptions that speech meant other than firm commitment to existing human rights policy. Human rights groups were distressed that speech could be and was used to suggest US backing away on human rights. END SUMMARY

ARGENTINA PROJECT (S200000044)
U.S. DEPT. OF STATE, A/RPS/IPS
Margaret P. Griefeld, Director
☒ Release () Excise () Deny
Exemption(s):
Declassify: () In Part ☒ In Full
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Date Declassify on Reason
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DRAFTED BY: POL:YThayer:gcr DRAFTING DATE: 2/24/78 TEL. EXT.: 277 CONTENTS AND CLASSIFICATION APPROVED BY: DCM:MChaplin

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1. Assistant Secretary Todman's Latin America policy speech received considerable coverage and editorial comment in the local press and was widely debated among interested Argentines as signaling an 'awakening US appreciation of Latin America' and beginning of 'a new, more realistic US foreign policy.' Some observers also referred to it as an indication of a change--~~on~~ⁱⁿ emphasis, if not content--in the Carter Administration's human rights policy; others ~~said~~^{said} it illustrated the existence of conflict within the administration over the policy.
2. The press placed early emphasis on the ten point "decatalogue" cautioning US sensitivity in carrying out the human rights policy. LA OPINION on February 15 ran the ANSA wire service report excerpting the "decatalogue" on page ~~XXX~~ one, accompanied by local commentary describing the speech as "severe criticism of the human rights activists." Elsewhere as well, that segment of the speech was exploited by the media and government sympathizers to support their various points of view regarding ~~the~~ US-Argentine ~~conflict~~^{differences} over human rights.
3. The next day, however, LA OPINION published the USIS-provided text in full with a sidebar commentary that Todman's ten points represented "not a shift but a refining of the same Carter policy." Three Argentine political figures interviewed by LA OPINION in the same


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issue interpreted the speech as "reinforcing the substantial aspects of the defense of human rights," while demonstrating a "more balanced view of Latin American reality" and "strengthening the essence of the non-intervention principle." LA PRENSA on February 18 cited Todman's statement that the "nature of US relations with other countries will depend on their handling of human rights", which it went on to criticize as "inadmissible interference by a powerful nation in the international affairs of a less powerful but equally sovereign state."

4. The BUENOS AIRES HERALD, which ran almost the full (headline: "An Unswerving Commitment to Promoting Human Rights" speech text on February 24, described as wise Todman's "appeal for greater moderation, realism and balance" in an editorial February 19. The HERALD said that "unfortunately, many pro-rights activists, both in the US administration and outside it, are more concerned with asserting themselves, advancing their careers or expressing their hostility towards political ideas they don't like than with the fate of the large number of people in jails and torture-chambers of foreign dictatorships." While the US has won a "reputation for itself among the victims, - real or imagined, of government action;..., influence with governments is, in realistic terms, usually worth far more than momentary popularity with any sectors of public opinion," commented the HERALD. It went on to


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suggest that "helping the forces for moderation and human rights that exist within the government will help save lives, lessen human suffering and extend real--and not merely rhetorical--respect for human dignity.

Weakening these forces by indiscriminate diatribes against entire governments or even countries is bound to be counterproductive."

5. Other Embassy contacts also expressed interest and/or concern with the speech as it was treated here. The Ambassadors of the European Economic Community countries asked the Ambassador last week whether the speech was to signal a change in US policy. They were apprised of the Speech's basic theme and provided full texts.

6. Human rights groups focused on the "ten points" and questioned whether the speech meant the US was backing off on human rights. A group called Relatives of Missing and Detained Persons asked Embassy POL Officer whether the US Government was "playing games" with them over human rights. The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo group also voiced considerable distress. The Emboff pointed out that the speech strongly reaffirmed the Carter Administration's commitment to human rights and distributed the full text to interested groups. A representative of the Permanent Assembly commented that it was unfortunate that the speech could be used by the government-controlled press to suggest


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the US was weakening on human rights and said he considered that the way it was treated locally was a "net loss" for those concerned with human rights in Argentina.

7. Publication and distribution by USIS of the entire text of the Todman speech, subsequent to initial reports, set the record straight however and acted against any further deliberate misuse of the speech ~~xxx~~ through selected quotations.

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